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Legislators Introduce Bill to Encourage Water Pollution Prevention Partnerships

Madison, WI...Today, a bill to reduce water pollution through improved pollutant trading was circulated by Senator Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay), Senator Jerry Petrowski (R-Marathon), and Representative Joel Kitchens (R-Sturgeon Bay).

“We have an opportunity to simultaneously address two pressing issues facing Wisconsin: water quality and farmer livelihood,” said Sen. Petrowski. “This proposal would create partnerships between local governments, industry, and surrounding farms that provide payments to farmers for adopting nutrient management practices or implementing new technologies that are known to reduce phosphorus, nitrogen, and other pollutants from entering local waterways.”

Municipal wastewater treatment facilities and industrial operations like paper mills face increasingly strict federal limits on the discharge of phosphorus and other pollutants. Under the bill, a third-party clearinghouse with oversight by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources would work with farmers to implement nutrient loss reduction strategies and certify the resulting pollution reduction credits. In turn, these credits would be sold to municipal water treatment facilities and other industries to help them comply with increasingly strict state permit requirements for pollution control.

The bill requires local government or industry to purchase credits that result in pollutant reduction that is 20% greater than they would be required to attain under their permits through facility upgrades, which are often expensive and only lead to small reductions in pollutant discharge.

“This is a win-win for the waters of our state, our farmers, and our taxpayers,” said Sen. Petrowski. “By establishing a system where these facilities can pay farmers to adopt farm management practices that will reduce runoff and soil erosion from their farms, the bill will allow us to work towards the goal of improved water quality at a reduced cost.”

The state of Wisconsin has been approved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to use several unique compliance strategies for phosphorus reduction and removal, which include pollutant trading. While we have a trading system in place in Wisconsin, the system is widely underutilized. The addition of a third-party will encourage more trades, remove an administrative burden from the state, and contribute to a long-term goal of improved water quality as well as an improved economic outlook for our agricultural industry.

“I believe this legislation is a key piece to the puzzle as we look for sustainable ways to support Wisconsin agriculture while protecting water quality across our state,” said Sen. Petrowski. “During a time when Wisconsin farmers are looking for innovative ways to make ends meet, this bill gives them an opportunity to supplement their income by selling credits to the clearinghouse while contributing to improved water quality.”

The bill was circulated to members of the legislature today for co-sponsorship and will be formally introduced in the upcoming weeks.

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